

2. The Phenomenology and 'formations of consciousness'

Kant's Philosophy fragmented human beings

Another approach to understanding Hegel is to look at his work in the context of the development of German philosophy, in particular his critique of Kant.

Kant was born in 1724, and published "Religion within the limits of Reason" at the age of 70, at about the same time as the young Hegel was writing his speculations on the construction of a folk religion at the seminary in Tübingen and Robespierre was doing it his way; Kant died at about the time Hegel completed his draft "System of Ethical Life."

Kant was a huge figure. Hegel and all his young philosopher friends were Kantians. But Kant's system posed as many problems as it solved; to be a Kantian at that time was to be a *participant* in the project which Kant had initiated, the development of a philosophical system suitable to express the aims of the Enlightenment; and that meant *critique* of Kantianism. We need to look at just a couple of aspects of Kant's philosophy which will help us understand Hegel's approach.

"I freely admit," said Kant, "it was David Hume's remark that first, many years ago, interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my enquiries in the field of speculative philosophy." Hume's "Treatise on Human Nature" had been published while Kant was still very young, following a line of empiricists and their rationalist critics, whose concern was how knowledge and ideas originated from sensation. Hume was a skeptic; he demonstrated that causality could not be deduced from sensation. One could witness the fact that one event always followed another, but this did not prove that the first was the *cause* of the second, and that the second *necessarily* followed from the first. This skepticism shocked Kant. If this were true, then there could be no science. In an effort to rescue the possibility of science, Kant set about constructing his *critical* philosophy, a kind of 'third way' between dogmatism and skepticism, whose aim was to determine the limits of knowledge, to draw a line between what was knowable and what was not knowable. This investigation led to a number of conclusions.

Hegel's critique of Kant is so extensive, penetrating all of his mature works, only a few points can be mentioned here.

The Subject

The most important issue is Kant's concept of the subject which was intended to solve problems such as the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and matter and the homunculus paradox – the idea of a subject like a little man inside the head that observes our perceptions and puts them all together and makes ideas. This idea which persists to this day, leads of course to an infinite regress, for the homunculus needs a little man inside his head as well. Kant's solution was the transcendental subject:

'By this "I," or "He," or "It," who or which thinks, nothing more is represented than a *transcendental subject of thought* = x , which is cognized only by means of the thoughts that are its predicates.' (*Critique of Pure Reason*)

So the subject for Kant was a nothing, like a point which is defined as the intersection between two lines – it is determinate and you know just where it is, but it has no width or properties of its own. This device allowed Kant to avoid the contradictions which had plagued earlier philosophers, but it led to a new range of problems. What Kant had done was to escape the problems of the subject's interaction with the material world by in effect placing the subject behind and outside culture and history. He had created an eternal changeless subject which could be analyzed by the methods of philosophy, without any empirical content, at the cost of reducing the subject to a nothing.

Hegel's proposal is to place the subject *back into culture* and history: the subject would be a product and part of culture and history, rather than standing outside of experience.

Dichotomy

Now, one of the consequences of Kant's transcendental subject was the resolution of the problem he inherited from the rationalist-empiricist debate: there were two kinds of knowledge, knowledge derived from two distinct sources which had to be combined somehow. On the one hand we had sensation, or what was called Intuition, which was the immediate basis for experience, the beginning of all knowledge, and on the other hand, we had Reason or Concept. Reason was needed to process the data of experience and acquire the categories through which sense could be made of experience. So we had two faculties: the faculty of reason and the faculty of intuition, and through reason we could acquire knowledge of the categories, of time and space, logic and so on.

One of the other implications, an essential part of how Kant resolved the contradiction he had inherited from the empiricists and rationalists, was that the world was divided in two: on our side was the world of appearances, in which we have constructed some meaningful image with our capacity for reason out of the stream of data from intuition. On the other side, beyond and behind appearances, lies the thing-in-itself, about which we can know nothing.

Kant demonstrated that certain kinds of entity, transcendent ideas, are essentially unknowable, the kinds of things which had tortured the minds of mediaeval philosophers and tended to reinforce the position of skepticism, using his “antimonies of reason.” Here Kant took just four claims, such as that the world has no beginning or that matter is infinitely divisible, and from each deduced the opposite claim, that the world had a beginning, or that the matter is not infinitely divisible, and by this method he claimed to show that certain kinds of question are just silly questions, and should not be asked. Apart from that, he believed that sciences such as logic, mathematics and geometry can be developed through pure reason rather than belonging solely to the domain of appearances.

Hegel’s response to these antimonies of reason was to praise Kant for his discovery but ask why limit it to these four? Any abstract claim is subject to sceptical criticism and can be transformed into its opposite. What Kant had claimed solely for transcendent ideas, Hegel claimed applied to all concepts. But instead of concluding that since transcendent ideas were internally contradictory therefore they were illegitimate and should not be admitted to thought, on the contrary said Hegel, this essential contradictoriness was a feature of all concepts, and winding up in contradiction was not the fault of the subjective action of thought upon an object, but was inherent in the object, the concept itself, and only thanks to this internal contradictoriness did a concept have reality and depth.

Hegel Replaced Kant’s transcendental individual subject with cultural-historical subject

One of the most important thing to be gained from a study of Hegel, and of his Logic in particular, is to understand Hegel’s concept of ‘subject’. We cannot do justice to Hegel’s concept of subject without traversing the Logic until we arrive at the concept of subject by the route that Hegel wishes to take us. After that we can put a little flesh on Hegel’s very sophisticated conception of the subject.

Most writers interpret Hegel by importing into their reading of Hegel Kant’s concept of subject. This is wrong. Now it is true that on occasion, especially when he is commenting on Kant, Hegel does use the word ‘subject’ in the Kantian sense, that is

to say, as meaning an individual, an individual adult citizen, to be a little more precise. This is invariably the sense in which the Kantian subject is used today, and the same sense is usually, rather kaleidoscopically, read into Hegel. Normally, Hegel simply uses the word 'person' to convey this meaning. For Hegel, 'subject' is not a philosophical synonym for 'person'. It is really important to remember this.

The word subject went through some transformations since the Romans translated Aristotle, particularly with Descartes, but the core idea that Kant has imparted with the word is the coincidence of three things: the *cogito* of Descartes, the bearer of ideas and knowledge, the idea of self-determining agent who bears moral responsibility for their actions, and identity or self-consciousness. All three of these entities coincide in the Kantian subject, and Hegel is true to *this concept*, but it is not an individual person.

The individual is just a single atom of the whole entity constituted by the collective activity of the community as a whole. Of course, nothing other than an individual human being can think or bear moral responsibility for actions, but they cannot do so as isolated atoms; the content of our thinking is thought-objects which are constituted by the activity of the entire community and past generations. And our actions are vain and meaningless except insofar as they take on significance through the relation of the individual to the whole community. The point is, how to elaborate this idea of thought and moral responsibility as collective activities, and at the same time develop the conception of individuality which constitutes the essence of modern society.

In the "System of Ethical Life," Hegel approached the question of labour not so much from the standpoint of how individuals *acquire* knowledge, as how the universal, that is, a culture, is *constructed*. At the basic level, people work with plants, and then animals, and then machinery, and in doing so produce crops, herds and means of production which are passed on to future generations. Likewise, in using words the language is maintained and developed and passed on to future generations, and finally, in abstracting the knowledge of culture and imparting it to a new generation in the raising of children, people are constructing and maintaining their 'second nature', the universals which are the content of all thought. When an individual thinks, they think with universals actively maintained by and meaningful only within their community.

So to provide an adequate concept of the subject, Hegel has to let go of the idea of an individual locus of experience, with access to universal principles of Reason existing in some fictional hyperspace on one side, and on the other side, unknowable things-in-themselves. The content of experience is thought objects which have been constructed by collective activity, and in which conceptual

knowledge has been objectified. The categories and concepts by means of which sensuous experience is interpreted are acquired by means of the same sensuous experience, because the categories are objective thought forms much the same as the finite things and events given in intuition.

What is left then of Kant's thing-in-itself? Hegel was not alone in finding the notion of the unknowable thing-in-itself unsatisfactory. The thing-in-itself has no determinate content; insofar as it were to have some content then it would cease to be in-itself. But nevertheless, the thing-in-itself is the source and origin of everything that is not subjective in appearances. Now this may make perfect logical sense, but so did Hume's skepticism. Hegel characterised this position as subjective idealism.

Kant sundered reality into appearance and things-in-themselves, knowledge into the faculties of intuition and reason, religious truth into 'religion within the limits of reason' and faith – this represented a fragmented human being, a human being sundered in two by a whole series of dichotomies. Perhaps this expressed very well the spirit of the times, but for Hegel as for other critics of Kant, this was a problem. Somehow or other, these dichotomies had to be resolved and the continuity of human experience reconstituted.

The Idea is adequate unity of Concept and Intuition

So let's look at how Hegel solved this problem of human beings having two faculties and two kinds of knowledge, Concept and Intuition, which have to be stuck together somehow. Hegel spells out a solution in the "System of Ethical Life." The structure of this work is an alternation between the Concept being subsumed under Intuition and Intuition being subsumed under the Concept. Hegel did not eradicate the contradiction between Concept and Intuition, but traced the process of mutual subsumption which does not merely extract knowledge from the outside world, but creates objective thought forms.

We perceive, describe, act upon and understand the world using our words, artefacts, institutions and so on, subsuming intuition under concept, whilst in practical activity, communication and experience generally we sensuously interact with thought-objects, subsuming concept under intuition, for example. We have a view about how the world should be – either ethically or theoretically, but on the contrary we find from experience that it is otherwise. The world is continuously at odds with how it should be and things continuously turn out other than we intended. The development of the individual person as well as the whole of history is the story of the resolution of this conflict.

When we use a tool, we sense it as an object, and using it constrains us to act with it in a certain way. It is a norm of labour. It might be a sledge hammer or a tack hammer or a claw hammer, and we have to use it in a certain way, and experience it. The tool is the product of reflection and continuous modification in the past, it is an objectification of that thought, so when we use it, we sensuously, intuitively apprehend a concept.

But things are never quite satisfactory. We feel a need. Our needs are never given directly from nature, there is always a gap, a gap between need and its satisfaction, and that delayed gratification is overcome, negated by labour. Without a gap between needs and their satisfaction there is no labour, activity perhaps but not labour. Labour itself generates new needs, needs met by new products. Thus intuition is subsumed under the concept. In the process the universal is being constructed. Nature is supplemented by a 'second nature' in the form of an artificial environment; along with the separation of consumption and production comes a *division of labour*, the possibility of supervision of labour – the differentiation of *theory and practice*, and a *surplus product*.

Schelling dealt with the problem of the two incommensurable faculties in Kant by simply inventing a third and declaring it to be the unity of the other two, and then speculating on its nature: did it represent aesthetic sense or was it Nature? But Hegel accepted that there are indeed two distinct entities here, and tries to understand the relation between them. Rather than *eradicating* the contradiction with a philosophical gesture, he makes the resolution of the contradiction the work of history, the labour of millennia in developing crops and herds, the arts, literature, science, new technologies, new institutions, new laws, new forms of association, and so on and so forth.

Hegel called the unity of Concept and Intuition, the Idea. But at any given moment, the Concept and Intuition are not in unity. So what does this mean? Hegel's central concept here is not a supreme, absolute kind of "master signifier," but a deficient, internally riven, incomplete, broken concept; every move it makes to try to rectify this internal contradiction only generates new contradictions, new problems. Rather than the final outcome of a never ending historical process, the Idea is a process.

Likewise, identity is a cultural product, which develops with the resolution of problems in the historical development of society. Hegel conceives of a starting point, not a 'state of nature' such as Rousseau and Hobbes presumed, of isolated individuals who need to be brought together to form a society, but rather as a community in which individuals do not differentiate themselves from society.

Consciousness always and only existed in and through individuals, but consciousness of oneself as an agent and creator of knowledge, and as a part of an historical process of knowledge, is the product of historical development. The opening up of a gap between the consciousness of an individual and the norms and practices of the community as a whole is a contradiction which is central to the kind of relations in which the Logic makes sense. The development of individuality is tied up with the development of culture as a whole, without which individuality cannot be sustained.

That material comes from the 1802-03 system. In the 1805-06 system sometimes called the "Philosophy of Spirit," some of this material is omitted; instead Hegel puts a lot of emphasis on the concept of recognition, he pushes the concept beyond its limits in fact in an effort to find a solution to the problem of individuality and rights within a modern society.

At the same time, the conception of a unitary Spirit as something pre-existing society and manifesting itself in human activity replaces the former idea of *Volkgeist* and *Zeitgeist* actually constructed by human labour. But it's still a Deist, non-interventionist God. The shift is a subtle one, and the same logical structure is still there.

This brings us to the final stage of introducing Hegel's mature philosophy as set out in the Logic, and that is the *Phenomenology*.

A formation of consciousness is rules of inference in a way of life or project

The *Phenomenology* is an important work as it is in this work that Hegel draws the connection between normal, non-philosophical human life and his mature philosophical system, which begins with the *Logic*. It is also the connecting link between his early work and his mature work. It is part of his mature work in the sense that it represents the completion of the series of transformations which he went through in his early work, but it is a terrible book in many ways. It is almost unreadable.

The *Science of Logic* is a very difficult read, it is true, and some passages are quite opaque, but at least it is structured, in fact it's probably one of the most structured works ever written, and this structure makes the work much easier to penetrate. The structure of the *Phenomenology*, on the other hand, is arcane. It was written in a rush to meet the publisher's deadlines while all of Hegel's other published works

were the product of many years of careful preparation. Even the Preface to the *Phenomenology* is different. The Preface is undoubtedly one of the best and clearest expositions of his philosophy to be found, because it was written at greater leisure, after having completed the main work. At the time of his death, 25 years later, Hegel was working on a second edition of the *Phenomenology*, but he had written on the manuscript: "Characteristic early work not to be revised – relevant to the period at which it was written – the abstract Absolute was dominant at the time of the Preface." So the *Phenomenology* represents a part of his mature work, but it is not a part of his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, as such. It is a preface to his system, the path from ordinary consciousness to philosophy.

It would take us far too far afield to get into the content of the *Phenomenology*, but to understand the subject matter of the *Logic*, we have to understand what the subject matter of the *Phenomenology* is. Hegel says it is about consciousness. It tells the story of the journey of consciousness three times; the first time is the story of thinking as it develops down through history, through a series of distinct stages; then he tells the same story again but this time instead of systems of thinking, we have social formations; and then the story is told again a third time from the standpoint of thought which understands itself to be that process and its outcome, genuinely philosophical thought that knows that it is the thought of an age.

The object whose development is being described is the same object, but from its subjective, objective and absolute perspectives. This object, whose change and development through history is described Hegel calls a *Gestalt*, sometimes translated as "formation" or "configuration of consciousness."

Gestalt is one of those German words like *Schadenfreude*, which cannot be translated but is simply imported into other languages. The normal meaning of *Gestalt* in German is 'figure' as in "what a fine figure of a man," referring to the overall dynamic configuration of a living thing. Goethe gave it the meaning in which is used in Gestalt Psychology, as an integral structure or indivisible *whole*, which is *prior* to its parts.

Alongside Napoleon, Goethe would be the great figure in Hegel's life, and it could be argued that with Kant and Aristotle, Goethe was his greatest philosophical inspiration. Given that Goethe, although younger than Kant, achieved fame before Kant and was an influence on him, then Goethe's importance is clear. The admiration was not reciprocated however. Goethe quite reasonably thought that Hegel had a serious communication problem and he never managed to understand what Hegel was talking about. But Hegel certainly took from Goethe. Although the concept of *Gestalt* that we find in the *Phenomenology* is very different from the concept of *Gestalt* we find in Goethe, taken together with the importance Goethe

gave to *Bildung* and the relentless struggle Goethe engaged in for a holistic science, against the analytical, positivistic science associated with admiration of Isaac Newton, Goethe's interest in morphology (a word he invented) and the concept of *Urphänomenon*, we can see the stamp of Goethe on the conception of the Phenomenology.

Urphänomenon is a word unique to Goethe; the prefix 'ur-' means 'proto-', or 'archetypal'; and it comes close to the 'abstract notion' in Hegel's *Logic*.

For Hegel a *Gestalt* is a "formation of consciousness" understood as the dissonant unity of a *way of thought*, a *way of life* and a certain *constellation of material culture*. 'Dissonant' because at any given moment in the history of any given people these elements are not identical. There are laws requiring that people should act in a particular way, but people don't act in quite that way, fashions become out of date, there are bad laws, and so on. People think of themselves as doing a certain kind of thing, but objectively they may be doing something quite new that they just hadn't noticed, and so on and so forth. So we have culture and practical activity and subjective thought all aspects of a single whole or figure, that is *Gestalt*, but always moving, always with internal contradictions.

And even there we are talking about ideal forms, to which the course of actual history conforms more or less. This question of the relation between the reality of a thing and the idea of the thing, is something Hegel deals with at length in the *Logic*. For Hegel, reality and the notion are just stages in the development of a thing. Nature and social life are lawful in some sense or other and to deny that would be nonsense. The purpose of science is to discover that which is lawful, that which is intelligible in its object. So the *Phenomenology* is concerned with the necessary forms of development of formations of consciousness. So although he is not talking about real consciousness in the sense of being concerned with what any given individual thought at some given moment, he is concerned with consciousness, but with consciousness as something which is intelligible, and objectively necessary.

With that qualification, Hegel is talking about consciousness, something which is empirically given. He starts with ordinary common, unphilosophical consciousness, and he takes the reader through a series of stages leading up to absolute knowledge, or the philosophical consciousness exhibited in the exposition of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*.

To recap, what constitutes a *Gestalt* is a *way of thinking* which includes the meaning attached to different institutions and artefacts, including words and symbols, a *way of life*, or social formation, that is, a form of practical activity, including the social institutions, and forms of practical activity whether in production, communication,

family life, government or whatever, and thirdly, a constellation of material culture including the language, art, means of production, land, food and so on. Each of these aspects constitutes the others and mediates between them.

There is no mind/matter dichotomy here. Actually, at no time in his life did Hegel ever show any interest in the usual problems of epistemology, the limits on the validity of knowledge, and ontology Hegel subsumed under his Logic. All those dichotomies which had tortured the minds of earlier generations of philosophers he just bypassed. He was just not all that interested in the question of whether and to what extent a thought-object corresponds to a object outside of and independent of thought, or using this correspondence as the measure of truth. For Hegel, subject and object always exist in a certain, mutually constituting, more or less adequate, relation to one another, and the question is the truth of the subject-object taken together, that is to say, the capacity of the subject-object, or the entire formation of consciousness, to withstand sceptical criticism. Under the impact of sceptical attack the subject and object will *both* change. The object changes because it is constituted by the subject, and vice versa.

And this brings us to some remarks on the main theme of the *Phenomenology*. The dynamic in the *Phenomenology*, the driver which pushes it on from one Gestalt to another is precisely this vulnerability to sceptical attack, and to be exact, sceptical attack from within, in its own terms. With this work Hegel introduced the novel device of 'immanent critique'. Instead of putting up a thesis and then standing to the side and pitting counter-arguments against it, testing it from a standpoint outside the object – the Gestalt – under examination, he enters into the Gestalt, adopts its way of thinking, and subjects it to a plausible internal self-criticism, and in this way demonstrates how every one of the Gestalten at a certain point fails to withstand sceptical critique and collapses. Some new Gestalt which is proof against this line of reasoning and can withstand the type of attack which the previous Gestalt could not, is then able to develop. And so it goes on.

The way Hegel organised the *Phenomenology* was based on the thesis that in any formation of consciousness there would be an agreed final arbiter of truth, some standard against which sceptical attacks against any element of the whole would ultimately come up against. So each main stage in the *Phenomenology* is associated with a criterion of truth which characterizes it, and more than a thousand years of history is represented in the passage through the series of such schemes.

It is not necessary to go the whole way with Hegel on this. It is also not necessary to confine ourselves to the grand historical stage on which this drama is played out. The fact is that in any project or concept, just one of the *Urphänomena*, to use Goethe's expression, or forms of social practice which make up a *Gestalt*, not the

entire historical form of life, just one project, exhibits the same basic features of a *Gestalt*. In any project or form of social practice claims are tested against the rationale of that project. This is how the *Phenomenology* has to be read.

We have formations of consciousness, which entail a certain line of thinking, a certain set of practices which instantiate the project and correspond to the line of thinking – the self-consciousness of participants, the objectives and world view it entails – and the artefacts around which the project is organised, from specialized language, gestures and so on, to collective property, technology and so on belonging to the project and so on. Within each project there are basic criteria and associated practices through which claims are tested, which underpin sceptical challenges to the project. Whether this works on the grand historical scale that Hegel claimed for it, is an open question, but that is one of those “in the last instance” questions mean very little. But in the course of presenting a kind of history of civilization and history of philosophy combined, Hegel has presented a profound approach to the understanding of human life, tied up in this notion of *Gestalt* in which he took his lead from Goethe.

Logic concerns the pure essentialities of the development of consciousness

So this brings us to the point where we can pose the question of the subject matter of the *Logic*. Hegel says that the *Logic* concerns the pure essentialities underlying the truth of the *Gestalten* which are the subject matter of the *Phenomenology*.

“It is in this way that I have tried to expound consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Consciousness is spirit as a concrete knowing, a knowing too, in which externality is involved; but the development of this object, like the development of all natural and spiritual life, rests solely on the nature of the pure essentialities which constitute the content of logic.” (Introduction to the *Science of Logic* §10)

In short, Hegel’s *Logic* bears the same relation to the projects, social practices and concepts of a *formation of consciousness* in the *Phenomenology* as ordinary Formal Logic (or logical calculus), bears to a set of *propositions* contained in a theory. It is this question of the subject matter of the *Logic* to which we now turn.

Course: Hegel

22033 Andy Blunden, Hegel, Phenomenology and Kant, 2007

4901 words